By the late fourteenth century, as Michael Johnston explains in the opening chapter of *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England*, the definition of the Middle English word "knight" had dilated to include not only an armored nobleman on horseback pricking across the plain, but also a man occupying the highest rank of the gentry--an emergent aristocratic, but not noble, class of landowners. These new knights were not errant, generally speaking, but rather situated: associable with a particular, usually rural, community, a manor, a family. This seemingly diminutive point of clarification in fact performs significant work, embodying in miniature Johnston's pervasive argument and methodology. He claims that during the gentry's crystallization as a social class between 1350 and 1500, Middle English romance both enacted and reflected the gentry's cultural, legal, and socioeconomic incursion. Among the romances copied during this period, Johnston identifies a "new type" (48) produced and read by the non-noble aristocracy: "gentry romance," a category that, he is quick to note, a medieval reader would not have identified as such, but can be perceived retrospectively. To render evident how gentry romances participated in and preserve the processes of class-making and (sometimes only aspirational) hierarchical assimilation, Johnston consciously puts into conversation typically discrete investigative modes, including the study of historical and legal documents, literary criticism, and paleography and codicology. When read in this multifaceted context, Johnston submits, romances--like their emblem the knight--become in certain cases not only more nuanced, but possibly mean differently altogether, allowing gentry readers to imagine their own place in England's popular literature. Given that the gentry were a geographically dispersed and largely non-urban population, the literary field in which Johnston works is an explicitly local one, comprised of texts in provincial contexts: manuscripts produced outside of more conventional book-production centers like London, and within communities desirous of narratives that inscribed a world at once more proximate to their own, but, like in old romances, still fantastically slant.

Chapter 1 considers the gentry as an ideological and actual group vis-à-vis the nobility, and seeks to address "a lacuna" (27) Johnston observes in relevant scholarship, namely that little attention has been paid to the gentry's role in "shaping and responding to cultural production" (22). After putting on the table previous scholarship, personal documents such as wills and correspondence, and manuscript books owned or rumored to have been owned by gentry families like the Pastons, Johnston pieces together a picture of gentry book makers, owners, and readers significant for its account of their devotion to literature, as well as their sheer numbers. The gentry were multilingual readers with wide literary interests and they were also casual writers, as their surviving correspondence attests. Although its implications are not specifically attended to in this chapter or elsewhere, one of the most compelling moments here is Johnston's close reading (30-31) of a letter sent to John Paston III from the woman he was courting in 1477, Elizabeth Brews, wherein she makes unattributed and easy reference to Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, a reference she presumably anticipated her letter's recipient would recognize. This moment
Newton, his estate; and where he potentially ranked among his most proximate peers as well as Yorkshire's local, and by the
proves Thornton differentiated between the "gentry" and the Arthurian romances he acquired and copied into MS Lincoln 91.
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discussion of Thornton and his books encompasses the geographic, social, and bookish milieu in which he lived, a context
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whom were manuscripts intended for the gentry audience produced?
Chapter 4 centers on these two families, their households, and their books, but it's also significant for the answers it provides to questions implicitly raised
Anthology was produced for and owned by the aristocratic and litigiously entrenched Findern family, while the Heege
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Eglamour of Artois); lifestyle maintenance (Sir Cleges, Sir Amadace, Sir Launfal); and distraint (Sir Launfal, Octavian, Sir
Amadace). Some of these texts fit the new generic paradigm more neatly than others. New readings of Sir Gawain and the
The book's final three chapters present in impressive detail four case studies of late medieval manuscripts in which gentry
romances survive from 1350-1500" (92), includes: Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Sutherland); as well as welcome
demonstrates a complex bookishness that shaped the intellect and worldview of individual gentry members, both male and
female. As readers sensitive to language, the non-noble landowning class played an active role, Johnston contends, in
shaping through words and books how they were informally perceived within the standing social hierarchy. Perhaps evidence of
their successful intervention, as some administrative responsibilities shifted to the counties, "Henry V's government
responded by policing those boundaries" (38) being unofficially and variously negotiated.
The second chapter investigates how the gentry intervened in England's literary form. "Gentry romance" did not overwrite old romances centered around courtly exile and return, but they did make space for the gentry's participation in popular literature. Johnston focuses in this chapter, and indeed in the balance of the book, on nine romances that contain "the most striking combination of the gentry [romance] motifs" (49): landowner as protagonist and his family as crucial supporting players (Sir Amadace, Sir Degrevant, and Sir Isumbras); provincial settings that obfuscate the family's rightful place in the aristocracy Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle and The Avowing of Arthur; precarious familial situations (Octavian, Sir Isumbras, and Sir Eglamour of Artois); lifestyle maintenance (Sir Cleges, Sir Amadace, Sir Launfal); and distraint (Sir Launfal, Octavian, Sir Amadace). Some of these texts fit the new generic paradigm more neatly than others. New readings of Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle and Octavian are especially convincing because of the care with which Johnston re-contextualizes them amidst socioeconomic shifts that occurred contemporaneously with their copying. In other instances, the sharp light shone on gentry motifs lets other (con)textual pieces of the puzzle slip from view. Various oddities of the older (pre-1350) and Eustace-like Sir Isumbras might be put in profitable conversation with its possible gentry interests. The relatively old romance Sir Degaré appears in two of the nine manuscripts Johnston deems critical preservers of gentry romance--Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.2.38 and London, British Library, MS Egerton 2862--but precisely what the experience(s) of a gentry reader with access to an old romance and a "new type" of romance might be is never ventured. Indeed, that the so-called old and new perhaps even traveled in concert, since Degaré appears with Sir Eglamour of Artois in both manuscripts, is a fact not explicitly discussed. The gentry members are not figured as simple in Johnston's sketch; quite the opposite. But their readerly forms are not as fully fleshed out here as one suspects they could be given the fluidity with which Johnston moves between close reading and codicology in the book's final chapters.
Chapter 3 asserts that members of the gentry were the "primary reading public" (89) for gentry romance and that the books containing these texts were local productions. Johnston names nine manuscripts that together embody bookmaking of a "local nature" (96). This corpus, "which accounts for every codex containing multiple gentry romances and almost every single gentry romance surviving from 1350-1500" (92), includes: Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Brogynyn II; Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.1.6 (Findern Anthology); Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.2.38; Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1 (Heege MS); Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS 91 (Thornton MS); London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula a.2; London, British Library, MS Egerton 2862; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61; and Princeton, University Library, MS Taylor 9 (Ireland MS). There are, Johnston tells us, four other extant manuscripts dated to earlier than 1500 that contain single copies of gentry romances, but he notes that he won't address those manuscripts here (92-93 n. 7). Yet at least one of these four manuscripts, Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 175/96, contains two romances--one "gentry"--that also appear contemporaneously, in the hand of Robert Thornton (a member of the gentry and subject of Chapter 5). Admittedly, Chapter 3 does not aim to trace transmission or identify texts that may have traveled in concert, but one wishes the lens were a little more widely focused here. Instead, Johnston shows that manuscripts containing gentry romances were not only geographically proximate to their readers, but also culturally proximate (102), a point that the nine manuscripts Johnston selects witness. They evince "local" production and often, though not exclusively, provincial readership in their content as well as in a local form identifiable by two key codicological features: dialect that places its scribe in the same region as a book's owner, and a lack of standardization within the book itself, suggesting it was produced "under non-centralized conditions" (98). Here Johnston offers detailed and much needed new descriptions of codices crucial to the study of Middle English romance, such as MS Egerton 2862 (olim Sutherland), as well as welcome new perspectives on miscellanies that have long been popular among scholars, like "Rate's book," MS Ashmole 61.
The book's final three chapters present in impressive detail four case studies of late medieval manuscripts in which gentry romances survive to us. Through extensive archival researches and close reading, Johnston reconstructs in his fourth chapter the local production, readership, and pointed desirability of two manuscripts belonging to two Derbyshire families. The Findern Anthology was produced for and owned by the aristocratic and litigiously entrenched Findern family, while the Heege Manuscript can be traced to the non-aristocratic, but persistently aspirational, Sherbrooke family. Chapter 4 centers on these two families, their households, and their books, but it's also significant for the answers it provides to questions implicitly raised but not explicitly answered in earlier chapters because of the book's discrete organization, questions such as where and by whom were manuscripts intended for the gentry audience produced?
Chapter 5 looks closely at the life and manuscripts of Robert Thornton, an active exemplar collector and copyist from 1420 to 1460 who left two large miscellanies in his hand. He was also a middle-gentry member of Yorkshire's North Riding and the discussion of Thornton and his books encompasses the geographic, social, and bookish milieu in which he lived, a context that, Johnston argues, influenced Thornton's access to and desire for exemplars that were at once wide ranging and very particular to his own socioeconomic station. To this end, Johnston contends that codicological and documentary evidence proves Thornton differentiated between the "gentry" and the Arthurian romances he acquired and copied into MS Lincoln 91. Thornton is the subject of considerable previous scholarship, but Johnston's own researches are meticulous and build, piece by piece, an even fuller picture of the routes Thornton could have taken to acquire exemplars; his day-to-day life at East Newton, his estate; and where he potentially ranked among his most proximate peers as well as Yorkshire's local, and by the
end of Thornton’s life, deeply fractured nobility.

The juxtaposition of the penultimate chapter on Thornton with the final chapter on the Ireland family of Lancashire provides perhaps the best implicit evidence for one strand of Johnston’s argument. For the differences between the gentry romances copied into Thornton’s book and those copied into the Irelands’ so exactly reflect the distance in their respective social stations that it seems evident their socioeconomic lives outside of the books were explicitly constitutive of the worlds they wanted to read about within them. Unlike Thornton, the Ireland family lived in a largely noble-barren county, allowing them to assert their power in a vacuum. Here again Johnston performs extensive researches around the family to contextualize their literary proclivities evinced in a manuscript made of two parts sewn together not long after copying. Part I contains three romances (Sir Amadace, The Awntyrs of Arthure, The Avowing of Arthur), while Part II comprises 80 pages of local court records related to the family’s manor of Hale. While the Irelands’ romances show an interest in moral virtue, they inscribe, too, Johnston shows, an ideal picture of a local aristocratic economy that, on one hand, centered on God-given “largesse” of spirit, but, on the other, mostly ignored the necessary business of a manor that would have enabled tangible largesse. While the romances, Johnston argues, reflect “a confident socioeconomic position, assured that the gentry belong among the elite” (209), the court records, “demystify much of the romances’ dreams of a limitless largesse” (244).

The Irelands’ book resembles Johnston’s in certain ways. Both rightly urge us to read romance and then to reread it while attending closely to its specific codicological and historical contexts. And each book itself models this impulse and act, but in both cases the larger stakes remain, to a degree, unarticulated. For instance, an open question for this reader is whether, given the evidence, an argument can be made for a site of authorship (a subject never broached) for certain romances that survive in unique copies and appear so precisely related to their manuscripts’ gentry makers/owners. Partly because it ends abruptly without a conclusion or coda, Johnston’s reader must imagine his book’s other possible interventions among current scholarship about, for instance, local communities (e.g. Hanna; Beadle), the genre of romance (Johnston himself provides an impressively thorough bibliography), and even the rise of literacy (e.g. Clanchy). Clarity and focus are certainly two of this book’s many strengths, but as I have noted at other moments here, a judiciously widened lens would throw into relief less immediately apparent connections between this book and medieval texts, their manuscript contexts, and other scholarship. Despite that wish, this carefully researched and tightly constructed book offers fascinating discoveries and important contributions in terms of its subject matter and, most especially, its interdisciplinary method.
Johnston has added greatly to our understanding of both the genre of medieval romance and its consumers, resulting in a book that is both satisfying in its conclusions and inspiring in its scope. *Deborah Seiler, Parergon* Johnston has managed to amass and present a large amount of material from which he has teased a fascinating conclusion. It is a welcome addition to the substantial historiography which exists for studies of the gentry, book culture and manuscript production in the late medieval period. Both romances in this collection, Ipomadon and the Stanzaic Morte Arthure, give voice to a traditional social ethic, one which connects virtue with nobility of blood. The pieces Colyns himself copied, by contrast, exhibit a “mercantile” social ethic, based on a model of social mobility through competition. These texts are less complicated, as they triumphantly celebrate two issues at the heart of gentry life in late medieval England: father-son relationships (mediating concerns over inheritance), coupled with the desire for social mobility (particularly of the landed gentry into the ranks of the titled nobility). Michael Johnston argues that many of the romances composed in England from 1350-1500 arose in response to the specific socio-economic concerns of the gentry, the class of English landowners who lacked titles of nobility and hence occupied the lower rungs of the aristocracy. Introduction 1. "A watered-down version of nobility": The Growth of the Gentry in Late Medieval England 2. Gentry Romances: A Literary History 3. Gentry Romances: The Manuscript Evidence 4. Derbyshire Landowners Read Romance 5. Robert Thornton Reads Romance 6. The Irelands Read Romance Appendix: The Composition and Circulation of Gentry Romances. Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England. Michael Johnston. Author Information.